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Henry Brandon: The problems and promises of SALT II

In the wake of the SALT II agreement, President Carter will be facing three major problems: The Senate ratification of the treaty; the adoption of a new weapons program that would meet the threat to the Minutemen missiles; and the politics of Soviet-American relations.

In the last five years a variety of attitudes gained currency in Washington. The arms control specialists favored SALT without a new weapons program. Those who made SALT their *bete noire*, such as Sen. Scoop Jackson, simply said they do not trust the Russians and hence ask for conditions that are totally unacceptable to the Russians. And the geopolitical strategists, such as Henry Kissinger, argued for a new weapons system to give the U.S. a counterforce capability.

The American people, judging by opinion polls, favor a SALT agreement by an overwhelming majority. They also want an improved but prudent defense program within certain budgetary limits and they consider the Russians a threat.

President Carter has done remarkably well under the circumstances in combining these irreconcilable sounding public attitudes.

He negotiated a SALT agreement with the Russians which among other things reduces the Russian threat, because it restricts the potential Russian ability to mount their powerful launchers with more than 10 MIRVed warheads — the intelligence community assumes that the number could be increased to 30. The agreement limits the improvements of existing launchers and it prohibits interference with the so-called national technical means the U.S. uses to monitor Soviet missile tests and developments.

It is hardly a secret, though rarely mentioned, that those special national intelligence means are also used for gathering intelligence well beyond missile information; thus the treaty in effect includes a broad protection for American satellite capability whose usefulness should not be underrated.

Each side will have a wild card and since the Russians have several new missiles in the testing stage, they will have to give up all but one among these new types.

At the same time SALT does not constrain the U.S. development or deployment of weapons now under consideration, which include the Trident II and III submarines, the development of cruise missiles, new bombers, the MX, new medium range ballistic missiles.

The three-year protocol imposes some constraints, but an amendment, acceptable to the administration, which Sen. Gary Hart will offer, will make certain that these restraints cannot be extended beyond three years.

With the U.S. thus free to go ahead with such a plethora of weapons, the Russians will have problems planning their own counterstrategy, while the limits and sublimits imposed on Russian missiles will enable the U.S. to gauge with considerable confidence Soviet forward planning.

The process of SALT treaty gestation will begin soon after the signing and last until the end of this year or maybe even longer. Much will depend on how convincingly the administration will put its case before the public.

In the meantime, the president will have to decide on how best to preserve an enhanced and survivable triad of land, sea and air-launched missile systems, whether to opt for the MX or the smaller Trident II, and how to base them to make them mobile and invulnerable.

These questions need to be resolved, pro-SALT senators say, otherwise the treaty will be a lost cause from the start. But it should not be overlooked that the Soviets could use a similar system, possibly more powerful, once the constraints of an agreement have lapsed.

President Carter argues that SALT, irrespective of the competitive relationship between the U.S. and the Soviets, is in the American national interest; but if the Soviet Union and its proxy Cuba intensify this competition in the Middle East and Africa, it is bound to affect the mood in the Senate.

SALT ratification by the Senate would, hopefully, improve the prospects for a more fundamental reduction of the massive and powerful Soviet land-based missile forces. It would also help restore that political middle-ground in national security affairs which so badly disintegrated during the Vietnam War and which is crucial to the rehabilitation of the credibility of American leadership in the world. The current deep distress felt among the allies over the fragmentation of the political consensus on issues of vital global interest would subside and ratification would assume a meaning transcending the importance of the treaty.

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